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Article:

Ozduzen, O. orcid.org/0000-0003-3639-9650 (2020) *The Paradox of Creative Constraints* —7 September 2019—*The Mosaic Rooms*, London. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 13 (1). pp. 120-122. ISSN 1873-9857

<https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01301009>

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Event Review: *The Paradox of Creative Constraints—7 September 2019—The Mosaic Rooms, London.*

Addressing the constraints that filmmakers, funding bodies and distribution avenues face in the Middle East, *The Paradox of Creative Constraints* was a one-day symposium held at The Mosaic Rooms, London, in partnership with Index on Censorship and the University of Essex. While presenting alternative and creative responses to ongoing social, political and economic constraints in the region, the event did not romanticize the ways authoritarian regimes interfere with cultural and cinematic expression. Organized by Shohini Chaudhuri, *Creative Constraints* brought together Iranian, Egyptian and Libyan filmmakers, representatives from funding bodies such as the Arab Funds for Arts and Culture and founders of independent cinematic spaces such as the Cimathèque Cairo, and also provided its audience with ample evidence of the ongoing creative vibrancy across the Middle East.

Although the commonly expected constraint for cinematic expression in the region is state violence in the form of censorship, the symposium challenged the stereotypical and Orientalist expectations about the Middle East. Instead, it showed how constraints are seemingly endless and multifaceted. Constraints can originate from the Middle East as much as from the West, such as travel bans to the United States. Another ‘external’ constraint is exoticism in international circuits such as funding bodies. As highlighted by most participants, exoticist perspectives still shape funders’ decisions whether or not to fund films from the region.

Throughout the event, the most common issue nearly all the participants tackled was the depiction of a miserable subjectivity or territoriality in the Middle East—not only through representations in films but also in public discourse. Here, colonialism is not just colonization of land but also colonization of the screen. For instance, *Creative Constraints* showcased *Ave Maria* (dir., Basil Khalil, 2015), a short film on nuns whose vow of silence is disturbed when an Israeli family crashes its car outside a West Bank convent. Initially, some Western funding bodies were not willing to fund the film, as it did not present a ‘miserable’ portrayal of the Middle East, nor did it depict the geographical space or the protagonists as victims. Some other funders did not support *Ave Maria* because the film did not present the ‘political’ picture of the region as they would have liked. Instead, the film was humorous rather than overtly political.

This line of thinking by various cultural institutions harkens back to ‘a post-colonial amnesia’, as identified by Elhum Shakerifar, MENA program advisor for the British Film Institute (BFI London). This form of amnesia operates in the

organization of funding bodies, as well as in the gaze of audiences. Postcolonial amnesia is 'a deeply political construction' (Wieringa 2009: 205) in which 'historical analysis is often absent, and the product of previous practices and policies are simply treated as a backdrop' (Isaacman 1997: 758). As part of the Creative Constraints event, filmmakers narrated personal and communal stories of their own cinematic journeys, in an effort to resist such a political form of amnesia. Audiences or funding bodies sometimes tend to assign filmmakers the responsibility of 'telling the whole story' from or about their countries, such as the expectation of a neatly resolved account of the Arab Spring in one documentary. However, the duty of filmmakers or other creative communities from the region is not to fill in gaps or to give 'full' pictures of history.

During the event, Egyptian director Tamer El Said exemplified this tendency by recounting how international communities wanted a film about revolution following the 2011 protests in Egypt—but his film *In the Last Days of the City* (dir., Tamer El Said, 2016) was not about the revolution. In fact, it is the personal story of the director who is unable to finish his documentary. In a similar vein, filmmaker and scholar Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri articulated how films from Iran that address marital or job problems have remained invisible in international circuits of distribution, because they are expected to 'directly' tackle political repression or 'overtly' represent a political issue. Two Iranian films showcased during the event, *Profession: Documentarist* (collective, 2014) and *Tehran: City of Love* (dir., Ali Jaberansari, 2018), challenged the exoticist and amnesiac tendencies in international funding and distribution bodies as well as the gaze of audiences. Both films go beyond the 'politics of pity', which entails 'further "othering" of the other' (Chaudhuri 2018: 33), and instead show the mundane lives of Iranians that continue in spite of political restrictions; in this case, the subject was the sexual fantasies of a female Tehran-based office worker in *Tehran: City of Love*.

Despite constraints such as visa delays for some of the participants, The Paradox of Creative Constraints represented the voices of multiple actors in the cultural scene of the Middle East, actors who benefitted from the multi-spatial existence of Middle Eastern communities and the cultural and cinematic vibrancy of the region. Thus, it offered a remarkable sense of sharing and togetherness for audiences, filmmakers, funders and academics.

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